

HEALTH

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TCM: Soya goodness

The soya bean (the seed of *Glycine max*, a member of the pea family) is a leguminous plant that has been widely cultivated in China and elsewhere for thousands of years. It was considered one of the five holy crops, besides rice, wheat, barley and millet. Soya is also referred to as "meat without bones".

Soya beans contain protein, fixed oil, coumestrol, isoflavones, lecithin, vitamins and minerals. It is a good source of essential nutrients for vegetarians, as the protein content is about 40 per cent by weight of the dry soya bean. Soya beans are extremely versatile as a food: they can be used whole, as sprouts, or processed as soya milk, tofu, tempeh, soya sauce or miso. The beans are rich in dietary fibre which can bring on flatulence and other abdominal discomfort, but processing can break down these fibres.

Soya is not only a "functional food" in TCM, but also a medicine. Two varieties of soya beans are used in TCM: the yellow and the black soya beans.

The yellow soya bean is often used as a food supplement to promote recovery from chronic illness or to treat common ailments. Different soya bean products are used based on different health needs. Sprouts help expel dampness and heat and are usually

used as a soup ingredient in summer. They are also good for people who eat too many hot foods and those who suffer from warts. Tofu enhances the production of body fluids, clears heat and toxins, and facilitates breast milk secretion. It is suitable for feverish conditions, breastfeeding mothers, bad breath, constipation and diarrhoea. Soya milk is the most absorbable form of soya. It benefits digestion and absorption, helps slow down ageing, aids growth and development and boosts immune functioning. Soya sheets nourish the stomach and lungs; they are used to relieve stomach upsets, arrest sweating and coughing and soothe the foetus during pregnancy. Fermented tofu promotes appetite and is often served as an appetiser during illness.

Black soya beans are considered to have more therapeutic effects such as promoting blood circulation, inducing urination and detoxification. They supplement and strengthen the spleen and kidneys, therefore they are useful for oedema, puffiness, weakness in the lower extremities, poor hearing, premature greying of the hair, thirst, dry eyes and blurry vision. Black soya beans can also be used in rheumatism and for joint and muscle pain brought on by damp, windy conditions.

Processed soya bean (*dan dou chi*) is added to herbal prescriptions for treating colds, flu and hot flushes. It is prepared by fermenting the beans with herbs such as mulberry leaves and wormwood, which help eliminate heat pathogens through the surface of the body. Soya beans are also used in topical applications to treat skin sores. Just soak the beans in water to make them tender and then grind them into a paste.

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Rose Tse and Jenny Eagleton are with Integrated Chinese Medicine Holdings (icm.com.hk). Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.